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# Translating Goethe: Der Gott und die Bajadere and Schubert's Musical Rendition

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Translating Goethe: *Der Gott und die Bajadere* and Schubert's Musical Rendition
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I have titled my translation of Goethe's poem "The God and the Bailadeira," since "die Bajadere" is derived from the Portuguese "bailadeira," which means "dancer" and refers to an Indian temple dancer, a "Devadasi". The last three lines of the ballad contain Goethe's moralizing about sinners, but the notion of sin and guilt is a Christian one, not in keeping with Indian temple practices and the traditions of the "bailadeira." There continue to be "bailadeiras" in a cult in Southern India, their faces painted a ceremonial white, on their forehead red and yellow stripes from turmeric (Haldi) and vermilion (Kum-Kum): http://www.kamat.com/kalranga/people/yellamma/yellamma.htm.

Goethe's "Der Gott und die Bajadere" belongs to the genre of the *Kunstballade* (Braak 96), which incorporates a number of stylistic aspects from the older*Volksballade,* a form used hundreds of years earlier. Like the *Volksballade*, the *Kunstballade* integrates epic, dramatic, and lyrical elements. Among the *Kunstballaden*, a tradition which began with Bürger's *Lenore* in 1773, Goethe's ballad is considered an *Ideenballade*, in which the theme of ethical human action is central [*in denen "der aktiv handelnde Mensch im Bereich ethisch-diesseitiger Menschlichkeit . . . Mittelpunkt des Geschehens" ist]* (98). Goethe himself writes about the ballad as a mixture of epic, lyric, and dramatic expression, which enables the poet to stimulate the imagination of the reader or audience in conveying the mystery of the ballad. The mystical aspect is conveyed in the content of the ballad, the mystery through the treatment of the material: the way it is presented. The repeated refrain adds lyricism (94). The narrator is a singer, originally perhaps accompanied by a lyre (from which the term "lyrical" is derived). The term "ballad" comes from the Italian *ballata* or the Provençal *ballada*, meaning "Tanzlied" or dancing song (Wilpert 50): a short, strophic composition, which was later artfully developed by the troubadours (51). Webster (1988) traces the ballad back to ME *balade*: ballade or song, from the MF and OProv *balada*, from *balar:* to dance, in Late Latin *ballare* (126).

Usually, the ballad consisted of three stanzas with recurrent rhymes, an envoi (*Geleit* in Wilpert's definition), and an identical refrain for each part of the poem. Goethe seems to adapt Villon's late medieval stanza of 8 to 12 lines, using 11 lines (repeated 9 times instead of the customary 3 times) in "Der Gott und die Bajadere." The concluding remarks of the envoi have only three instead of 4 lines and coincide with the "refrain" for the last stanza. The eight-line stanza also resembles the form of the sixteenth century "Jüngere Hildebrandslied" with its shorter lines and end rhyme instead of *Stabreim*..

When I translated the poem, I tried to capture the rhythm and flow of each stanza. Technically, it is created by eight trochaic lines countered by three dactylic lines with *anacrusis* (in German: *Auftakt*). I did not consciously analyze the metric arrangement but listened to stressed and unstressed syllables in the ballad, the movement created by the trochees [from the Greek *trochaios:* running (Webster 1264)] and the countermovement of the dactyls [from the Greek *daktylos:* finger (Webster 322)]. Hearing that pattern inwardly, I attempted to render images and ideas rather than translating Goethe's text verbatim. It was impossible to capture the intricate rhyme pattern (*Endreim* with the pattern ababcdcd-eed throughout the poem in the first eight lines; alternating feminine and masculine endings; couplets in the first two lines of each *Terzett* following every octave, the last line rhyming with the last line of the *Terzett*, linking the rhythmically

juxtaposed parts of each stanza). Instead of Goethe's structuring ababcdcd-eed, my first stanza rhymes aabbcded, and the *Terzett* does not rhyme at all. For the most part, I maintained the alternating trochaic and dactylic rhythms and created occasional internal rhymes, together with some end rhymes to sustain the auditory linking of lines in my rendering of the ballad.

In my original translation, printed in TRANS-LIT in 2001, a *Terzett* occasionally became a *Quartett*, lines were lengthened or extra phrases inserted to capture the full meaning of a German word; sometimes I overinterpreted a phrase for the sake of creating a rhyme or to sustain the rhythm. I did not adhere to a fixed rhyme pattern and deviated from the given rhythm in a number of places. Goethe's poem became my poem, which lacked the formal intricacy of the original ballad. When I discovered that Schubert had set Goethe's ballad to music (Naxos 8.554665, "Goethe-Lieder," Volume 1: 1999. Ulf Bästlein, Baritone, with Stefan Laux at the piano), I wanted to adapt my translation to Schubert's music [Friedländer's Schubert Album, Volume VII (106 –107)]. This forced me to reconsider my first version of the poem. Listening to the song version, I noted the problematic lines, trimmed elaborate phrases, and tried to adhere strictly to the rhythm of the poem and the musical rendition. I rewrote parts of stanzas 2, 3, and 6, shortened a line here and there, in the process sometimes losing a word or phrase from Goethe's original.

The musical interpretation offered challenges in itself. Schubert's music appears not to be too difficult technically, but because of the repetition of the same melody throughout, an interpretation could easily become monotonous if the characteristic elements of the ballad are ignored: the epic, dramatic, and lyrical aspects. As the pianist and conductor Mark C. Graf indicated, the vocal presentation had to be varied by changing the tempo and dynamics of the narrative to match the drama and mood of the text, which is full of surprises, ranging from serenity and joy to violence and tragic turbulence before the final apotheosis. There is a lot of tension in the movement and countermovement of the ballad (in content: the descent of the God, the elevation of the woman; in the physical love encounter on the human plane; in form: in the alternation of the trochees and dactyls of the poem's rhythm; in the alternation of masculine and feminine endings of each stanza's line. Formally, there is some resolution in the coupling in the first two lines of each*Terzett* and the linking of the last line of the rhythmically opposed parts of each stanza to make one out of two). Resolution in the drama of the ballad comes through the transformation by fire and the triumphant climax at the very end.

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Elements of Hindu Myth in Goethe's "Der Gott und die Bajadere"
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Central to Goethe's ballad, "Der Gott und die Bajadere" ["The God and the Bailadeira"] are two Indian customs: 1) the tradition of the "Devadasi" in local Hindu temples and 2) the tradition of "Sati" (= wife) immolation, both cultural practices now forbidden by law but still practiced in some parts of India.

Goethe's "Bajadere" (from the Portuguese:"bailadeira") is an Indian temple dancer, a "Devadasi." The Devadasis attached to the temples were sacred dancers or courtesans (Renou 31), often trained in the art of dance from childhood and offered to the God of the Temple at puberty. There are seven types of Devadasis (Thurston), incarnations of the mythological Urvashi, the celestial nymph. According to legend, from her, a thousand Devadasis were born: (http://www.hinduwom.org/issues/devadasi.htm). Their dance was equally erotic and spiritual, representing a symbolic lovemaking with the God of the Temple (http://www1.cs.columbia.edu/~deba/odissi/devadasi.html). The Devadasi in Goethe's ballad dances, bows, and presents flowers to the stranger, the God Mahadöh or Shiva incarnate, also known as Shiva Mahadeva. Her actions and gestures represent the devotional ritual in temple practice: the worship of the lingam, Shiva's emblem, which often rests on a yoni base (http://www.clas.ufl.edu/users/gthursby/tantra/shiva.htm ). These ancient masculine and feminine religious icons are anthropomorphized in the ballad and their union is rendered as a performance at the core of Goethe's poem. Louis Renou in his volume on Hinduism considers the worship of the god as an animation of the idol: "The rite consists of welcoming the god as a distinguished guest. Bathing the god, dressing him, adorning him and applying scent, feeding him, putting flowers round him and worshipping him with moving flames accompanied by music and song: such are some of the essential features of the rite" (30). Goethe's ballad reconnects ritual and myth, revitalizing their interdependence through the narration of the story. To this day, though outlawed, there continue to be Devadasis or "bailadeiras" in a cult in Southern India: http://www.kamat.com/kalranga/people/yellamma/yellamma.htm.

"Sati" was a secular practice prevalent among certain sects of society in ancient India. The widow who burned herself on her husband's funeral pyre was considered righteous or "virtuous" (http://www.kamat.com/kalranga/hindu/sati.htm) and thought to go directly to heaven, redeeming her ancestors by this meritorious act. She was worshipped as a goddess and temples were built for her or hero-stones erected in her honor. The custom of "Sati" was considered voluntary. One theory about the origin of "Sati" claims that it began with a jealous queen, who heard that dead kings were welcomed in heaven by beautiful women called Apsarasas. When her husband died, she demanded to be immolated with him, so that she would arrive at the same time and prevent the Apsarasas from consorting with him (http://adaniel.tripod.com/sati.htm ). More likely, the custom of "Sati" (prohibited by law in 1829) was brought to India by Scythian invaders, who adopted Indian funeral practices and instead of burying their dead king with his mistresses or wives and servants began to cremate them. The Scythians were warriors, and in Hindu society, castes of warrior status or higher observed this custom (Aharon Daniel).

Goethe's ballad derives from an Indian legend in which a mortal woman attains divinity through her love and devotion for the God who appears to her in human form. There are similarities with the Greek myth of “Eros and Psyche,” where a God is made human and a mortal divine. The poem is about the union of male and female in the *hieros gamos* (the sacred marriage) and the humanizing and spiritualizing processes central to all mystery religions. "Der Gott und die Bajadere" is based on P. Sonnerat's travel narrative "Reise nach Ostindien und China" (1783) and appeared first in Friedrich Schiller's "Musenalmanach" (1798). The Indian source remains unknown, but Indira V. Peterson (Mt. Holyoke College) at a recent conference of Asianists has suggested the poem's origin to be a narrative in a Tamil collection about the god Shiva's deeds in the South Indian temple city of Tiruvarur. The legend flourished mainly in local oral tradition: http://www.aasianst.org/absts/2000abst/South/S-153.htm

The ballad contains the theme of androgyny, but it reverses the process of individuation and maturation associated with this archetype in Western tradition: the joining of male and female in the poem signifies a return to origins through love, the Eros principle. Operative in this particular Indian legend is the idea of overcoming polarity and separation in the joining of male and female energies and returning to the original one-ness of the cosmos in the embrace of the divinity, attaining to a state beyond opposites to a pre-conscious totality, reversing processes of ego-consciousness. Marie-Louise von Franz describes the state of enlightenment called "Bodhi" in Buddhistic philosophy and "Satori" in Japanese Zen Buddhism as "attempts of consciousness to jump back in a kind of intuitive flash into the oneness which existed before the splitting into two" (*Creation Myths* 155). Goethe's ballad ritualizes this idea as a love story which also sheds light on the idea of "Sati" immolation in the poem.

Indira Peterson identifies the Devadasi of the legend as Manikkanacchiyar, a model devotee, “who insists on becoming the Sati of a man who died after spending the night with her.” She speaks of a “conflation of female cultural icons” in both the legend and Goethe’s treatment of the Devadasi-Sati traditions: one linked to temple ritual, the other representing a secular practice. The conflation of female archetypes, I would argue, represents the first stage of transformation for the Devadasi. Through EROS, she is conjoined with the God. Committing SATI, claiming to be his wife, she assumes heroic status denied her by the chanting priests, who represent orthodox religious thought. By choosing the Devadasi as his bride beyond life and death, Mahadöh elevates her to Goddess status, to be revered as SATI, like his original consort, who immolated herself, according to myth. In this transformation, the secular heroine returns to her spirit mate, who has shed his mortal form in the fire to once more become the God. In his human incarnation, Shiva Mahadeva (Mahadöh) has realized himself in the love union with the Devadasi, embracing his soul, his feminine self in her. She is the female principle returning to the source of being and at-one with it.

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## THE GOD AND THE BAILADEIRA
(An Indian Legend)

Translation of Goethe's "Der Gott und die Bajadere"
by
Edith Borchardt

Mahadöh, Lord of the Earth,
For the sixth time chooses birth
To become like us again,
Feeling our joy and pain.
He consents to live among us,
To endure what may arise.
Judging sternly or with kindness,
He must see with human eyes.

After the wanderer has looked at the city,
Spied on the mighty, regarded the people,
He leaves them at dusk to go on his way.

As he leaves the town behind him,
Where the last few houses stand,
There he sees a white-cheeked maiden,
An abandoned, lovely child.
"Greetings, Virgin!" – "Thank you, Sir!
Wait, I'll come and join you there." –
"And who are you?" "Bailadeira,
And this is the House of Love."

She sways and she strikes her cymbals in dance,,
Encircling herself as if in a trance.

So lovely, she bows and offers him flowers.

She beguiles him past the threshold,
Courting him with liveliness.
“Handsome stranger, lamps will brightly
Light at once this hut of mine,
If you’re tired, I will lave you,
Offer comfort, bathe your feet.
What you wish, I will provide it,
Rest, or pleasure or playful retreat.

She tends to his many pretended pains.
The God can’t help smiling while playing his part,
Perceiving with joy a human heart.

And he asks for her enslavement;
She obliges with great cheer,
And the maiden’s artful power
Slowly is transformed in her.
Thus the bud of passion’s flower
Opens and in time bears fruit:
With obedience in her spirit,
Love is not so far removed.

But sharply to test if her love will remain,
The Master of the Heights and Depths
Seeks lust and horror and furious pain.
And he kisses her white cheekbones
‘til she feels the pain of love.
Thus his captive, tears escape her,
Though she never cried before;
At his feet she sinks suppliant,
Not for pleasure, nor for gain.
Oh, and her compliant limbs
Now she tries to move in vain.

And so for the chamber’s festive enjoyment
The night provides a dark comforting veil
Of gossamer yarn a beautiful trail.

Sleep comes late amid their banter,
She wakes early with brief rest
Finding at her heart, not sleeping,
Dead her much beloved guest.
Wailing, she falls down upon him,

But she cannot waken him.
And they carry his stiff body
To the funerary rim.

She hears the priests chanting the songs for the dead.
And raving and racing, she cuts through the crowd.
“Who are you?” they ask her, “Why rush to this pit?”

At his bier she then collapses,
Her despair rings through the air:
“If you don’t give back my consort,
I will seek him in this grave.
Shall his limbs to ashes crumble,
His divine form fall to flames?
He was mine, was mine above all,
Oh, it was but for one night!”

The priests go on chanting: “We carry the aged
Who have grown weary and late have grown cold.
We carry the youthful before they’ve grown old.

Listen to our priestly teachings:
This man never was your mate.
Since you live as Bailadeira,
Your love does not obligate.
With the body follow shadows
Into the still realm of death;
Only wives die with their husbands
For their honor and restraint.

Now sound the drums in mournful complaint!
Accept, o ye Gods, the flower of his days:
Embrace this young man in the pyre of flames.”

Thus the chorus without pity,
Adding to her heart’s distress:
And with arms stretched wide before her,
She jumps to her fiery death.
But the God within the flames
Rises from the funeral pyre
And in his divine embrace
Llifts his love above the fire.

Notes:

1. I have deliberately omitted the last three lines of the ballad, because of Goethe's moralizing about sinners at the end of the ballad. The notion of sin and guilt is a Christian one not in keeping with Indian temple practices and the tradition(s) of the "bailadeira." I have used the Portuguese term to render "Bajadere." There continue to be "bailadeiras" in a cult in Southern India. Their faces are painted a ceremonial white. Goethe's "gemalte Wangen" is not clear about this.

2. It was customary in India (though it is now illegal) that a woman, when her husband died, would follow him into the funeral flames.